

SPOTLIGHT

Ritu Primlani

Environmentalism Made Feasible

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Running restaurants is an alluring business proposition for many. But what does that have to do with environmental conservation? Doing something for the cause of environment that revolves around restaurants is not everybody's cup of tea. Meet Ritu Primlani, Oakland, California-based non-resident Indian and founder of the non-profit Thimmakka's Resources for Environmental Education.

Greening South Asian (Ethnic) Restaurants, one of her important projects, uses language, cultural and economically appropriate methods to teach hard-to-reach minority businesses about environmental conservation. They are asked to follow certain standards for which they are certified. About 45 restaurants are part of the program now.

A geography graduate from Kirori Mal College in New Delhi with a masters in geography, urban planning and law from the University of California, Los Angeles, Primlani was inspired by Saalumurada Thimmakka of Hulikal village in Karnataka, who adopted 284 banyan trees as her children to quiet her neighbors' taunts of infertility. For this unusual effort, she later received an award from the Prime Minister for social forestry.

Primlani started Thimmakka in 1998 and initiated environment outreach efforts for the South Asian community, such as the first South Asian Concert for the Environment in Los Angeles in 2000.

But why target restaurants? "If you are religious, you may go to a church or a

temple, but everyone goes to an ethnic restaurant," Primlani says, and delivering an environmental message at a restaurant has very high impact. According to her, restaurants consume more energy per square foot than any other retail space, they are responsible for 16 percent of the solid waste going into California landfills, and they pollute the ocean with improperly disposed of grease and oil.

Primlani was comfortable working with restaurants owned by Afghani, Nepali, Sri Lankan, Indian and many other communities, but initially faced difficulty reaching out to restaurants of the Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese communities because of cultural differences. That's when she started taking interns, mostly community leaders, with appropriate language skills who could communicate better with the restaurant owners of various ethnic groups. This is a major advantage, according to Primlani, as local government bodies do not have the resources to conduct outreach in different languages for minority businesses. She started alone but now has added two more staff members.

Primlani's clients implement environment-friendly measures such as solid waste minimization and water and energy conservation. Restaurant owners least aware of regulations due to cultural or language barriers became leaders in their business segment in environment compliance, she says. The entire certification process is voluntary, and Thimmakka's services are free. The aim is not to

impose any financial strain on the restaurant owners. Thimmakka has 56 partners, including those from the government, nonprofit and business sectors, the media and private foundations. Some provide heavily subsidized or free equipment and services to the restaurants that adhere to the certification process. Incentives, such as free publicity and promotional performances by local South Asian artists in participating restaurants are also organized by Thimmakka.

Primlani, who is in her early thirties, earlier worked as a consultant, cartographer and geographic information systems specialist. Her résumé boasts half-a-dozen awards, including the California Governor's Award for Leadership in Economic and Environmental Partnerships and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Leadership Award in 2003. Last year she received the San Francisco Bay Area Hero Award and the Global Ashoka Innovators for Public Social Entrepreneur fellowship.

During her trip to India in January, she set up an office in New Delhi and has met local government officials and a few restaurant owners. She hopes to provide similar services to restaurants in India, although this may require a few modifications in the guidelines to meet local needs, she says.

Thimmakka is contracting with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency to conduct outreach to Sikh farmers in Yuba and Sutter counties in California. □